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AIDES TO CARTER FIND UNSETTLED QUESTIONS IN INTELLIGENCE PLAN

Priorities on Use of Spy Satellites and Listening Devices Seen Among the Major Issues

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 23. — Despite President Carter's announcement earlier this week that he planned to complete an executive order pulling together United States intelligence surveillance priorities, which are now in disarray, knowledgeable Administration officials said that the new disposition will leave important issues unresolved.

The surveillance issues concern how best to use the most sophisticated and expensive intelligence-gathering equipment at the disposal of the United States against real and potential enemies, the officials remarked. This equipment consists of reconnaissance satellites and electronic listening devices.

Attempt to Centralize Apparatus

It is a question that has existed at least since 1794, when balloons developed by Jacques Etienne and Joseph Montgolfier were first used for military observation, and since the early part of this century when surveillance of telephone communications became a reality.

The question was, given the ability to observe actions by hostile powers, but limited by resources and expenditures, what does one survey? Are movements of troops and war materiel always as important as the economic situation of a hostile power such as harvests and other observable factors like transport?

After months of debate, the White House is expected next month to release an executive order by President Carter attempting to centralize the farflung American apparatus for technical espionage, electronic and photographic.

However, interviews with several officials close to the reorganization effort indicate that the new marching order is unlikely to resolve struggles concerning the priorities of reconnaissance.

New Phase Will Begin

One particularly controversial issue still to be resolved, the officials said, is whether a major reorientation of American intelligence efforts is necessary in the light of the serious failure by the intelligence community in August to detect possible South African moves towards nuclear testing.

"The executive order will only mark the end of the initial phase of the intelligence debate," said one official. "When it is released, a new phase will begin and a long list of troubling questions will have to be addressed."

The main question, in the opinion of many, is how various key policy-makers will come to share what specialists call "tasking authority," the power to decide what missions the intelligence establishment's arsenal of reconnaissance aircraft, surveillance satellites, electronic listening posts and foreign agents will be assigned to do.

"In essence, the problem is really quite simple," said one official. "With reconnaissance satellites, for example, somebody has to decide whether you take pictures of tanks in East Germany or wheat fields in the Ukraine."

"But when you realize that decisions of this sort have enormous implications for the ability of the United States to respond both to traditional military threats and a new range of problems such as international terrorism, the process suddenly becomes quite complex."

As described by officials, the United States since World War II has never had an efficient means of sorting out these questions. For a start, control over intelligence systems has been vested in different offices throughout the Government.

While the Central Intelligence Agency exercises responsibility for "human intelligence collection," the major offices involved with remote techniques of information-gathering are housed in the Pentagon: the National Reconnaissance Office, run by the Air Force, looks after satellite intelligence and the National Security Agency, headed by a Navy admiral, operates highly secret programs for intercepting communications and breaking codes.

As a result, the Pentagon and the C.I.A. have found themselves frequently at loggerheads over making intelligence assignments, with Pentagon officials stressing the importance of monitoring Soviet armed forces and the C.I.A. often more concerned with information of greater interest to civilian policy-makers, such as Soviet agriculture.

After an exhaustive study of these problems, Senator Frank Church's Select Committee on Intelligence issued a long report last year that called for intelligence "tasking" to be centralized in the office of the Director of Central Intelligence, now Admiral Stansfield Turner.

towards a new range of threats, such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism and human rights.

"It is difficult to estimate, but probably 90 percent of our satellite coverage is directed at the Soviet Union and its allies," a White House official noted. "Do we really need to know every time a rabbit moves in Omsk?"

White House interest in questioning existing intelligence assignments was strengthened by a curious episode in early August when Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev informed Mr. Carter by letter that South Africa might be preparing an underground nuclear test in the Kalahari Desert.

Warning Based on Satellite Data

According to some officials, the Soviet warning was based on satellite intelligence, and at a Cabinet-level meeting, Mr. Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, asked the C.I.A. to confirm the report. After a day's delay, the agency is said to have reported back to the White House that it had found no evidence that indicated that South Africa was getting ready a nuclear test.

The C.I.A., the officials said, was instructed by Mr. Brzezinski to check again and after another delay, intelligence officials sheepishly admitted that they had overlooked several details at the corner of a satellite photograph of the Kalahari which suspiciously resembled a nuclear test site.

These details, the officials said, included an elaborate array of security fences, trenches apparently designed to carry cables for electronic equipment and a bore hole into which an underground nuclear device could be lowered.

Although the Soviet warning was verified in time for the White House to deliver a stern warning to South Africa, the officials said that the episode reinforced the view that the White House had to get more deeply involved in assigning intelligence tasks.

New Balance Won't Be Easy

At the same time, White House officials acknowledged that the problem of working out a new balance of intelligence efforts will not be easy. "It is simple to say that we need to pay more attention to economic intelligence or nuclear proliferation, but it is much more difficult to convince military commanders that they need less information about Soviet Armed forces," said one.

Another problem is that the "tasking" issue has become bound up in a wider struggle over exercising authority within the intelligence community. Although the White House has moved to enhance Admiral Turner's powers, resistance to this idea in the Pentagon is said to have led to the new executive